

# Sick As: Bloody moments in the history of medicine

**Author:** Gael Jennings  
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While I was confined to bed with the flu, my partner went to the local library to find me “something decent to read.” He returned with a kid’s book!

It’s not often children’s book makes it to the pages of a professional and academic journal, but Gael Jennings’ humorous, yet informative, take on the gorier aspects of the history of medicine makes a fine exception. Jennings spent more than 10 years as a laboratory scientist, and she has a PhD in immunology. She then worked as a science journalist for the ABC (television and radio) for 13 years, and recently moved into freelance scientific journalism. *Sick As*, is her first book.

Jennings presents a broad-brush view of the history of medicine through the eyes of a child aged about 10. “Mabel” receives a CD-ROM in the post, and as she navigates her way through the CD, she sees snapshots of medical history... Ambroise Pare discovering that oil of roses is a better balm for gunshot wounds than is boiling oil... Horace Wells painlessly removing his own tooth while under the influence of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) - the first case of operative anaesthesia... Rene Laennec developing the stethoscope... Florence Nightingale nursing British soldiers in the Crimean War... Christiaan Barnard conducting the first heart transplant.... The choices presented to Mabel on her CD-ROM are also available to the reader, giving the book a “choose your own adventure” feel.

Not just a recount of events, Jennings takes some literary licence to keep her work entertaining. A large breasted patient is said to have motivated Laennec to develop the stethoscope

because her buxom physique prevented him from placing his ear directly onto her chest to listen to her heart, as was the usual practice for doctors of the day. Sir Almoth Wright, who determined how to prevent clotting in stored blood, is referred to as Sir Almost Right. Roland Harvey’s comic illustrations further emphasise the lighter side of each situation, sometimes to the point of ridiculousness – Harvey’s instructions on use of the stethoscope include a tip to not insert the ear-pieces into your nose.

Blood, guts, gore and grime feature highly in this book. No offensive area of medical history escapes Jennings. Mabel is astounded by the paucity of women in medicine, the burning of female herbalists as witches, and the exclusion of women from medical schools until only 150 years ago. She sees the filth of Paris in 1832, the year of the great cholera epidemic, and the battles against the establishment of Ignaz Semmelweis and Joseph Lister to clean up their respective hospitals. Both were laughed at for the suggestion that doctors should wash their hands between consultations.

At the close of her book Jennings tackles some of the more complex ethical questions that arise from recent medical history, and paints a picture of a possible future in which the great miracles of medical history become monstrosities. Cloning and transplants make way for a world in which “health, youth and beauty can be bought or engineered from a human gene bank... while the poor still die from diseases of the past.” *Sick As*, might be marketed as a book for children, but because it is detailed, humorous and thought provoking, it contains something for us all.

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